**Nature of India Society- Unity and Diversity**

In ordinary language diversity means variety based on differences.  However, with reference to a society, diversity means differences that distinguish one group of people from other groups.  Such differences may be biological as in racial groups, religious, linguistic or any other differences that mark off one group from others.  Thus in the case of a society, diversity refers to collective differences.

The term diversity is the opposite of uniformity.  Uniformity means similarity.  Thus when people have some similarity or have some characteristics in common, there is uniformity among them.  Thus when people share the same religion or language, there is religious or linguistic uniformity among them.  It is important to note that like diversity, uniformity is also a collective characteristic.

Unity means integration or solidarity.  In a society unity refers to integration and also to the social psychological condition of one-ness or we-feeling.  Unity differs from uniformity because uniformity presupposes similarity, while unity does not presuppose similarity.

 As Durkheim has pointed out, there are two types of unity or solidarity, namely, mechanical solidarity or organic solidarity.  Mechanical solidarity is based on uniformity, and is found in simple societies like tribal and traditional societies.  On the other hand, organic solidarity is based on differences and is found in complex and modern societies.

On the basis of Durkheim’s explanation of mechanical and organic solidarity, it is possible to make the following statements. Unity signifies integration. Unity or solidarity based on uniformity is mechanical.  Unity does not mean the absence of diversity.  Unity is not the opposite of diversity.  Organic unity or solidarity implies the existence of variety or differences.  Therefore the expression ‘unity in diversity’ is not a contradiction in terms.  In fact, the expression ‘unity in diversity’ is apt and fitting for describing the fundamental nature of Indian society.

Indian society is characterised by different types of diversity.  The more important forms of diversity are racial, linguistic, and religious and caste based. Anthropologists have presented different racial classifications of the Indian population.  B.S. Guha has identified six racial types. They are: 1) the Negrito, 2) the Proto-Australoid, 3) the Mongoloid, 4) the Mediterranean, 5) the Western Brachycephals, and 6) the Nordic.

The Negrito is the people who belong to the black racial stock as found in Africa.  They have black skin colour, frizzle hair, thick lips, etc.  Some of the tribes of South India like the Kadar, Irula and Panyan have distinct Negrito features.

The Proto-Australoid group of people includes the aborigines of Australia and other people of the Pacific Islands, the Ainu of Japan, and the Vedda of Sri Lanka.  In India, this race is represented by the Ho tribe of Bihar and the Bhils of Vindhya hills.

 The Mongoloids usually referred to as the people of the yellow race, are the racial stock native to Asia. The Chinese, Japanese Burmese and other peoples of South East Asia belong to this group.  Mongoloids are found in North-East India.

The Mediterranean group of peoples are associated with the Dravidian languages. They are characterised by long head, medium stature, and dark complexion.  The population of South India is predominantly Mediterranean.

 The Western Brachycephals (broad headed) are spread throughout North India.  They are characterised by broad head, medium stature and relatively light complexion.

 Nordic peoples are found mainly in the Scandinavian countries.  They characterised by tall stature, light skin and hair, and blue eyes.  Elements of this race are found in Rajasthan and Punjab.

Indian society is characterised by immense linguistic diversity. Grierson, the famous linguist, identified 179 languages and 544 dialects.  But the Census of 1971 has reported that 1652 languages are spoken in India as mother tongue.

 Indian languages belong to four main speech families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Sino-Tibetan and Austric.  About 70% of the people speak Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Gujarati and Marathi.  About 20% of the people, mainly in South India, speak Dravidian languages. Sino-Tibetan speakers are found in North-east India.  A few smaller groups speak Khol-Munda languages of the Austric family.

 In addition to the Indian languages, there are some people like the Anglo-Indians who use English use English as their mother tongues.

The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution lists 18 languages as official languages. Of these, Manipuri belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family. Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada are Dravidian languages.  The others are Indo-Aryan languages.

India is the home of many religions.  According to the Census of 1991, Hindus constitute the largest religious group with 81.56% of the population.  Muslims, the second largest group, account for 12.56% of the population. 2.32% of the population are Christians.  Sikhs constitute 1.94% of the population.  0.77% is Buddhists and 0.40% is Jains.  In addition there are Zoroastrians (Parsis) and Jews.  There is also a small number of people adhering to tribal religion.

Each religious group includes various sects and cults.  Hinduism has not only Shivas and Vashnvaites, but also followers of Shakti sect.  Hinduism has given rise to many other sects and cults.  The chief division among the Muslims is between Sunnis and Shias.  Christian s in India is divided into denominations and churches.

 While Hindus and Muslims are found in all parts of the country, adherents of other religions are concentrated in some parts.  Christians are found mainly in South India and in the North-East.  Sikhs are concentrated in Punjab.

India is known as the land of castes and tribes.  The term caste is used in two senses.  Sometimes, it refers to the division of Indian society into four varna, and sometimes to the jati.  The varna hierarchy consisting of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra is accepted all over India. The jati on the other hand, has a regional point of reference and signifies a hereditary endogamous status group.  There are more than 3,000 jatis in India.

The caste system in India is not confined to Hindus alone.  There are castes among Muslims, Christians and Sikhs as well as other communities. Besides the diversity based on caste that characterises most of the population, there is also a significant segment of tribal population.  There are more than 450 tribes in India, living in different States.  The population of the North-Eastern States like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland is predominantly tribal.

In addition to the major forms of diversity described above, there are also other types of diversity.  There is diversity between villages, towns and cities.  Even among the villages there is diversity in settlement patterns.  There are very great differences in the types of houses, dress and food habits.  Diversity in social customs and practices relating to marriage and family is also very great. Thus India is a land of enormous diversities.

 Though Indian society is characterised by immense diversity, there also bonds of unity and mechanisms of integration which have contributed to the unique character of Indian society.  Herbert Risley, the Census Commissioner in 1911, has pointed this out in the following words.  “Beneath the manifold diversity of physical and social type, language, custom and religion which strike the observer in India there can still be discerned a certain underlying uniformity of life from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin”.  The factors that contribute to such unity are several.

The first bond of unity of India is its geo-political integration.  India is known for its geographical unity marked by the Himalayas in the north and the oceans on the other sides.  India has enjoyed some sort of political unity from the ancient times.  During the British period, political unity was more or less complete, though the British followed a policy of divide and rule. After Independence, India is a sovereign State.  The same Constitution and the organs of the Government govern every part of the country.   At present all Indians share the same political culture marked by the norms of democracy, secularism and socialism.

The second source of unity is called geo-cultural unity. This is seen in the institution of pilgrimage. As M N Srinivas has pointed out, the concept of unity is inherent in Hinduism.  There are sacred centres of pilgrimage in every corner of the land.  Certain salient aspects of Sanskritic culture are to be found all over the country.  India is the sacred land not only of the Hindus, but also of the Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists.  The Muslims and Christians, too, have several sacred centres of pilgrimage in India. In particular, the age-old culture of pilgrimage has fostered a sense of geo-cultural unity.  Geo-cultural unity is seen also in the arts and architecture, dance and music.

 A third source of unity is the tradition of accommodation and tolerance.  In particular, Hinduism is known for its highly syncretic character and spirit of tolerance.  Hinduism is an all-encompassing religion.  Sociologists have identified the not only the great tradition of all-India Sanskritic Hinduism but also the local traditions of village Hinduism.  In addition, basic Hindu concepts like samsara and karma are shared by many others.  Even Muslim rulers like the Mughals recognised the importance of religious amity between Hindus and Muslims.

Another source of unity is the basic framework of social organisation.  Traditional Indian society believed in ascribed status and organised groups in a hierarchy on the basis of ritual purity. This is the essence of the caste system.  The institution of caste cuts across diverse religious groups and gives them all a common social idiom.

The tradition of interdependence is another important source of unity.  This interdependence is seen in the form of jajmani system found in villages.  The term “jajman” refers to the patron or recipient of specialised services.  The jajman is the food producing family and the other families supported them by providing specialised services.  Thus the jajmani system is a functional interdependence of castes.  It is based on economic relations but embraces all aspects of village life.  The jajmani system is the traditional form of integration of different castes at the village level.

In tune with the traditional bonds of unity, after Independence, the Indian State opted for a pluralistic society.  It adopted the model of a composite culture based on unity rather than uniformity. This model calls for the preservation and growth of plurality of cultures within the framework of an integrated nation. This cultural pluralism with regard to religion is expressed in the form of secularism.

Kaleidoscope, India is a plural society in letter and spirit. Some problems persist.  Others have spawned in the last few decades.  These are ethnic movements, religious fundamentalism, and new twists in the pattern of inter-communal relations, linguistic conflicts, regionalism and sub-regionalism. Pose a major challenge to contemporary Indian society.